United Nations E/CN.6/2011/NGO/23

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
3 December 2010

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-fifth session
22 February-4 March 2011
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2011/1.

10-66808 (E) 130111

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Statement*

1. Statement endorsed by the International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Salesian Missions and Sisters of Charity Federation, NGOs in special consultative status with ECOSOC.

Education as a human right

2. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in article 26 states:

> "Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms."

3. The outcome document of the fifty-first session of the Commission on the Status of Women, on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against the girl child, specified education, a basic human right, as an essential means for girls to reach their full potential.

4. The review theme of this session will focus on the progress made in ensuring girls the full enjoyment of their human rights, including the right to education. During the review, it is imperative that the root causes and barriers to gender parity in elementary and secondary schools be addressed. Obstacles to enrolment, retention and achievement must be identified and eliminated.

Gender disparity

5. Much progress has been made since 2000 towards achieving Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 2, to achieve universal primary education. UNICEF reports that in more than 60 developing countries at least 90 per cent of children are in primary school. However, the number of girls not attending elementary school remains disproportionately higher than the number of boys. The majority of children (worldwide, 54 per cent of the 72 million) who are out of school and who are illiterate are girls, thus MDG target 3.A, to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015, remains a serious challenge.

6. Social and cultural norms, extreme poverty, gender stereotypes, discriminatory laws and policies and gender roles with their expectations and obligations constitute root causes and barriers which prevent girls from attending primary and secondary schools.

7. Girls who live in extreme poverty are obliged to do much of the domestic work that enables poor families to survive. Carrying water, tending livestock, harvesting crops, gathering firewood, and caring for younger children are often the responsibility of the girl child who must spend much of her time in accomplishing these daily chores. Even if she were able to enrol in school, she is often obliged to drop out in order to have the time needed to fulfil her household responsibilities. It

* Issued without formal editing.

is estimated by the International Labour Organization that 218 million children worldwide, engage in some form of child labour.

Good practice

8. Both Morocco and Egypt can serve as examples of countries that have addressed both MDG 2 and MDG 3.A, by implementing institutional, socio-cultural and financial strategies to address the obstacles and barriers to universal education and the elimination of gender disparity in primary education.

Morocco

9. In 2000, Morocco established the Charter for Education and Training which focused on providing universal education and gradually making it compulsory in order to eliminate gender disparities, even in rural areas where the highest rates of gender disparity exist. In 2006, the Najah Emergency Plan was adopted to accelerate the implementation of the Charter and achieve its goals.

10. The main difficulties faced in implementing these measures were deeply embedded cultural gender stereotypes, attitudes towards girls and their education, low household incomes which forced children, especially girls, to seek work, and the needs of girls living in rural areas.

11. Morocco took specific measures to address some of these difficulties. For example, its discriminatory laws against women were revised. The nationality law now allows Moroccan mothers to give their nationality to their children. A gender-specific approach to resource allocation was adopted in the national budget, and human rights and gender equality were promoted in the educational system and in long-term planning.

12. To address distance from school and safety issues of girls living in rural areas, provision has been made for transportation to and from school for them thus assuring their safety. As an incentive to address the need for girls who expected to participate in home tasks and income generating activities, flour and oil are distributed to parents who send their girls to school. To reduce dropout rates among girls coming from low income households school supplies are provided to girls attending school.

13. Schools, canteens and boarding schools have been constructed, teacher training concerning gender issues and the adoption of a gender-specific and human rights approach in textbooks are some of the practical means that are being used at the national level to achieve their goals.

Egypt

14. The National Girls' Education Initiative (GEI) launched in Egypt in 2000 following the Dakar Declaration on Accelerating Girls' Education and Gender Equality of the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) aimed to decrease the gender gap in primary education, improve the quality of education and achieve education for all by 2015. Based on a well developed plan which includes preparation, implementation and mainstreaming phases, it employs complementary strategies that address poverty, equity, empowerment, community and girls' participation, bottom-up planning, volunteerism, coordination and networking.

15. After the initial planning was completed, the government allocated significant monies to implement the plan which included the construction of 1,076 nearby schools in the poorest and most difficult rural areas to reach which provide free, high-quality primary education. "Girl friendly" schools with adequate sanitation were built in villages where disparity between girls and boys attending school was the highest, and families were offered health insurance along with free education and school supplies as incentives for girls to attend school rather than work to support the family.

16. Cooperation among development partners, civil society, United Nations agencies, academic institutions, and citizens working together with the government has been an essential and key factor in the successes achieved up to now in both countries.

17. Eradicating culturally embedded causes of gender inequity is done only gradually over a long period of time, nonetheless significant progress has been made in providing girls access to education and in addressing the obstacles they encounter. Where there is a strong commitment to achieving gender equality, progress is made through long-term community engagement and cooperation with development partners, even within the most deprived and vulnerable populations and in countries where deeply rooted cultural and social customs can be serious barriers.

18. Recommendations to Governments:

- Ensure birth registration and national identity to all girls.
- Develop comprehensive long-term strategies to address deeply rooted cultural gender stereotypes and attitudes towards girls and their education.
- Eliminate all barriers to girls' access to education including school fees and lack of school supplies.
- Assure a safe environment for girls at school including adequate sanitation facilities.
- Provide transportation for girls living in rural areas and safety in travelling to and from school.
- Ensure the safety of girls attending school, both within the school premises and in travelling to and from school.
- Compensate parents who send their girls to school rather than obliging them to work to help support the family.
- Invest in teacher training and gender-sensitive curricula.
- Promote and support development partnerships for girls' education.